

The government of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf declared a state of emergency in response to a severe outbreak of the deadly Ebola virus in 2014, leading to the temporary suspension of certain rights afforded to the media. The Ebola crisis also led to an increase in censorship during the year, as the government attempted to control reporting on the crisis.

Legal Environment

Liberia's constitution provides for freedoms of speech and the press, but these rights are often restricted in practice. In July 2012, Sirleaf became the second African head of state to endorse the Declaration of Table Mountain, which calls on African governments to abolish criminal defamation laws. The Press Union of Liberia (PUL) submitted a draft bill to the parliament later that year that would move forward with decriminalization; a similar draft was submitted by the PUL and other media groups in December 2014. However, no action had been taken on the bill as of the end of 2014. In addition, Liberia's libel laws allow for large financial awards in civil suits, which can cause severe economic difficulties for journalists and media outlets, and foster self-censorship. Although no major lawsuits were filed in 2014, suits filed against media houses filed in 2012 and 2013 sought more than \$20 million in total damages, according to the PUL.

In July 2014, Octavian Williams, the publisher of the *Nation Times*, was arrested for a traffic offense, in what many saw as retaliation for a series of articles that criticized one of the president's sons. Corruption and bribery in the judicial sector contribute to a largely unfavorable legal environment for journalists.

In 2010, Liberia enacted West Africa's first freedom of information law. Journalists and the general public have the right to access any public document, with exemptions for those related to national security. In 2013, a court in Monrovia heard the country's first freedom of information case. The court ruled in favor of the plaintiff, ordering the Liberia Anti-Corruption Commission to disclose the asset declaration forms of cabinet ministers and other officials to Liberia's Center for Media Studies and Peace Building (CEMESP). Local media hailed the decision as a victory for transparency.

In October 2014, the PUL challenged the government's plan to begin a licensing scheme for journalists, which would require media personnel to register annually with the Information Ministry. According to CEMESP, there are very few legal provisions to help guide media policy or offer protections to journalists in Liberia. Existing regulatory bodies are largely ineffective at implementing laws and regulations governing the media, and self-regulatory mechanisms have not yet been developed. A 2008 bill that would have established an independent broadcast regulator with safeguards against government intervention is still waiting to be passed by the Senate. Efforts to convert the state broadcaster into a public-service broadcaster were also pending at the end of 2014.

Political Environment

Although Liberia's media environment is not heavily polarized, outlets often display loyalties to political parties, particularly during election periods. Media outlets express a range of political views, generally without restriction.

In August, the government declared a 90-day state of emergency as part of its efforts to control the spread

of Ebola. The emergency order included a nightly nine-hour curfew, limiting the media's ability to accurately report the outbreak; however, journalists were later exempted from the curfew. In October, the government declared that journalists could be arrested for interviewing or filming Ebola patients, or reporting from hospitals, if they did not first obtain written consent from the Health Ministry. The state of emergency was lifted in November.

In August, police raided and later barricaded the offices of the *National Chronicle*, shut down the paper, assaulted staff, and briefly detained two staff members. The Information Ministry said the paper's suspension was based on complaints from national security officials. The suspension, which remained in place through the end of 2014, followed controversial articles alleging the planned creation of an interim government intending to unseat the president.

Violence against the press has declined in recent years, but journalists still face threats and intimidation in the course of their work, especially by state security agents. In February, police attacked Papie S. Kollie, a reporter with Liberia Women Democracy Radio, while he covered a football tournament. A formal complaint was made to police, but no investigation had taken place at year's end. In August, *FrontPage Africa* journalist Henry Karmo was assaulted by police outside the Foreign Affairs Ministry after photographing demonstrators protesting the state of emergency.

Economic Environment

The media sector includes both state-owned and private outlets. Although about a dozen newspapers publish with varying regularity, including the government-owned *New Liberian*, distribution is limited largely to the capital. Low literacy rates and the high price of newspapers and transportation make radio the primary source of information for most Liberians. Monrovia is home to over 15 independent radio stations, at least two of which broadcast nationwide. Community radio has expanded to more than 50 stations across the country, and television has grown to at least six stations.

More than 5 percent of Liberians accessed the internet in 2014. There are no official restrictions on internet use, and there were no reports during the year of the government monitoring online communications.

There were no reported cases in 2014 of the government or other entities attempting to influence editorial content through the withholding of advertising. However, reporters commonly accept payment from individuals covered in their stories, and the placement of a story in a paper or on a radio show can often be bought or influenced by outside interests. Media houses sometimes accept payment from individuals not to run certain stories. Most media outlets are not self-sustaining and rely heavily on government advertising and financial support from politicians or international donors. According to the Liberia Media Center, newspapers are typically owned and operated by journalists, who are rarely trained in business management. Journalism training is also limited, with CEMESP providing one of the only venues for training in journalistic ethics.